

COUSIN BETTE.

THE WORST WOMAN IN FICTION.

COUSIN BETTE. BY HONORE DE BALZAC. Translated by KATHARINE PRESCOTT WORMELEY. 12mo, pp. 557. Roberts Brothers.

There has been said that Balzac dissected human life with the feeling of a naturalist, being only concerned to get at and to set down the actual facts, and treating good and evil with the same calm scientific impartiality. "He is," said the critic, "interested in it for itself, in all its manifestations, in all its gradations, he loves it; he only demands to watch its movements under every aspect." M. Taine thought that because of this large point of view Balzac was inevitably concerned in a special way with the analysis of typical subjects and with the observation of those striking social phenomena which general laws might be deduced from. "In his eyes," he continues, "a lead is not less interesting than a butterfly; a bad attracts him as strongly as a nightingale." "Cousin Bette" is an example of this tendency. One of the most powerful and sombre of social tragedies, written with Balzac's most concentrated energy and force, full of figures whose lifelikeness is unapproachably realistic, it is at the same time in a marked and special manner a study of typical influences, carried forward and wrought out with that unswerving, passionless, pitiless fidelity to human nature and to the actual facts which gives to so many of this great writer's works an impression as of the tread of destiny.

It has been said that Balzac dealt with preference with great passions. It might also have been said that, in dealing with great passions, the breadth of his general view, the extent of his canvas, the intense vividness of his colors, and the latent sense of the inevitable bearing down all opposition and steadily pushing its appointed victims to the end assigned, he produces that impression of dark, implacable Fate, which constitutes the atmosphere and the fascination of Greek tragedy. Yet his methods are entirely modern. The tremendous ultimate catastrophes which whelm his sinners affect us so powerfully for the reason that they are never fortuitous. We are shown the whole process of degradation which leads to the climax. We are made to understand how evil habit grows, expands, absorbs more and more of the nature, creeps up like a slowly rising flood about the victim, extinguishes his or her good elements one by one, and finally takes possession of, and in so doing ruins, the whole being. No such appalling application of this method has ever been made in Balzac's study of Baron Hulot d'Ermeny. This man is introduced to us prosperous, flourishing, full of honors and emoluments, blessed in his family, with every opportunity and incentive to noble living. But he harbors the vice of sensuality, and it proves a deadly, ineradicable disease. Step by step he goes down. He betrays his wife, impoverishes his children, sacrifices his relatives; he loses self-respect; his sense of honor becomes dulled; he robs the State; he is forced to relinquish all his appointments, sinks lower and lower. Age but intensifies his vice. "He is no longer a man, but a ferment." He grows wholly shameless, unfeeling, brutal. And his end, how frightful! A weaker artist than Balzac would have held his hand at the "return of the prodigal father"; he would have allowed it to be supposed that Hulot, after his long and eventful life, would have returned and lived quietly at home. But the Hulots do not reform, any more than a man reformers from general pangs. They have killed all the influences which might have saved them, or, to speak more precisely, they have blocked all the avenues by which curative agencies could approach the centre of morbid action. Hulot's final infamy is the necessary sequence of all that preceded it. The wretch had ceased to possess a conscience. All the higher part in him was dead. He had sacrificed every one and everything to his vice. He ended by the sacrifice of his last grain of manhood.

There are three lines of typical study in "Cousin Bette." The Marneffe is the second; a wonderful piece of work, repulsive, no doubt, but not the most repulsive figure in the book. For the Marneffe is frankly wicked, brilliantly vicious, destitute by nature and training of all doubt, destitute of scruple, employing her seductive arts with a latent sense of professionalism. There is nothing to suggest the idea that Valerie is a fallen angel. On the contrary, it is made clear that her origin was evil, and that she acts altogether after her kind. With all her cunning and duplicity, moreover, the Marneffe is only an instrument in the hands of a yet more evil principal. She is the incarnation of perfidy, as may be seen in the audacious playing off of her lovers, one against the other. She is also rapidly personified, though that limitless greed of gain she shares with the whole class of demi-mondaines. But bad and vile as the Marneffe appears, she is, after all, less startling, less completely sinister a character than the dreadful creature who gives her name to the book. Cousin Bette is, we are inclined to think, the worst woman in fiction. Her nature is far stronger than that of Valerie Marneffe—is not vulgarly wicked; it is essentially diabolical. She is a woman in whom the natural forces and emotions, diverted from their normal employments, have all been concentrated upon the fruition of a late and implacable and persistent as it is without justification.

In the coarse peasant nature, the contrasts of accident and fortune have rankled. Brought up with Adeline, the future wife of Baron Hulot, Bette has been subjected constantly to the humiliation of being used as a foil to the beauty, Adeline makes a great marriage. Bette remains an obscure peasant. The attempts of the Hulots to find her a husband only exasperate her more. She knows she is not a prepossessing, and she rages against the fact. She hates Adeline for her beauty, for her piety, for her charity, for her husband. She hates her especially because Adeline is good, and she herself is evil-minded. But this hatred, which fills her whole being and dominates her life, is entertained in a cold-blooded, deliberate, intent manner, which is peculiarly horrible. The ingrained vice of Bette is shown in her friendship for the Marneffe. Without passion herself, she nevertheless derives strong enjoyment from the contemplation of its effects in her friend. This is the true diabolical character; the soul that loves evil for evil's sake. The Marneffe, when on her fearful death-bed, has a certain drawing toward spiritual things, and begins to talk of making her peace with Heaven. Whereupon Bette murmurs: "She is out of her head!" When Valerie, ashamed to seem repentant, suggests that after all, in pretending remorse, she is only "practising her last seduction,"—the grim Lorrain exclaims joyously—"There I recognize my Valerie again!"

With what cold, patient, pitiless malice she pursues the Hulots from beginning to end! Treachery with her becomes a mere commonplace instrumentality, and mendacity the first principle of social intercourse. How placidly she passes from the Marneffe to Adeline and Hortense; how deliberately and coolly she lays her traps; how thoroughly she plays the hypocrite at all times! She is never exposed. No crisis overtakes the Marneffe and includes Crevel in the catastrophe; Hulot sinks beyond rescue in the mire; the sainted Adeline proposes a life-long martyrdom, dies at length of a broken heart; only remains another exposure before the reader's eyes, male and female; but Bette maintains her mask to the end. "She kept the secret of her hatred through the weary dying anguish of pulmonary consumption; and found supreme satisfaction in seeing Adeline, Hortense, Hulot, Victorine, Steinbock, Celestine and the children in tears around her bed, considering her the angel of the family." The insatiable hatred she has cherished all her life—since the time when, a child herself, she tried to

disfigure the comely face of Adeline—as last reacts upon her, however. "She will end by being happy," thought Lisbeth the evening before her death, as she noticed the veneration which the baron showed for his wife. . . . The sight hastened Bette's end; and her coffin was followed by the whole family in tears." She dies implacable, unrepentant, sorry for all evil committed, regretful only that her schemes, so cunningly contrived, have somehow miscarried. It is an awful picture, but it is emphatically a work of genius.

These three main lines of development are reinforced by a number of subordinate studies, of which several are remarkable. There is Crevel, the type of the opulent bourgeois, luxurious but calculating, vulgar to the core, hating in his heart aspirations—if they may be so termed; characterized by his coarseness and animalism; characterized by that kind of cynical, hard good humor which is the natural expression of a vulgar rich man's satisfaction with his surroundings; in short, a perfectly natural and genuine type, nothing exaggerated, and perhaps in few particulars exaggerated. Another life-like study is that of Wenceslas, the young sculptor who has the gift of design, but lacks the enthusiasm and the industry to execute his inventions. Balzac has dissected this genius manqué with characteristic precision and insight, and the observations upon art which accompany it are of themselves well deserving careful meditation. Hortense, Victorine, Celestine, and last though not least, the unhappy Adeline, are drawn with a free hand in bold outlines. But the story is dominated by the Hulot and Bette episode, and the reader will recur again and again to those unsurpassed creations of tragic force and preternatural grasp of human motives, emotions and influences. It cannot be said that "Cousin Bette" is a book for those who like only optimistic presentations of life. It is a study in morbid pathology; an inquiry into the workings of passions and vices, the mischief actually caused by which in all human societies is too patent and too constantly in evidence to be denied or ignored. Balzac was the pupil of Geoffrey Saint-Hilaire and he followed the methods of his master. He must be judged by the scientific standard, therefore, and from that point of view there can be no hesitation in declaring "Cousin Bette" a most powerful work. It only remains to be said that the present translation by Miss Wormeley is not less admirable than the previous Balzac volumes rendered into such nervous English by that lady.

SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS.

GERALD MASSEY'S ANALYSIS.

THE SECRET DRAMA OF SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS. BY GERALD MASSEY. Imp. 4to, pp. 452. London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co.

This new edition of Mr. Massey's work has been largely rewritten, and is now presented in what the author considers its final form. It is a laborious and elaborate analysis of the "Sonnets," undertaken for the purpose of demonstrating the errors of all former commentators in the interpretation of this body of poetry. Mr. Massey departs widely from the common acceptance of the sonnets, the mystery of which has, in his view, been chiefly created by the complete failure of all the earlier Shakespearean scholars to comprehend their true genesis. Regarded as purely personal expressions of the poet, it has been found impossible to explain them, save by constructing a theory of his life which finds no support whatever in authenticated biographical records, and which is, moreover, hopelessly in conflict with any view of his character compatible with his intellectual works. In order to obtain a plausible explanation of the "Sonnets" on the purely personal theory, it has been found necessary to violate all probability and to ignore the plain significance of contemporary testimony by supposing that Shakespeare entertained an unnatural passion for some unknown.

Proceeding on the same general lines, other "Sonnets" have been interpreted by the invention of a mistress, of whom, had she ever existed, the poet must have had every reason for being ashamed, and with whom it is required of the poet to believe that he deliberately pilloried himself to all eternity. The lofty and austere ethics which breathe from so many of the "Sonnets," the elevation of their tone, and the cloistered purity of their atmosphere, have not struck the inventors of these degrading conjectures as presenting any obstacle to the acceptance of their foul imaginings. Throughout his dramatic works Shakespeare inculcates the highest reverence for woman, the most profound regard for the sanctity of the marriage bond. This does not give pause to the critics who, bent upon explaining everything rightly or wrongly, deliberately impute to the Poet of the "Sonnets," not only a systematic contempt for marital fidelity, but a coarseness and shamelessness so phenomenal as to account for the cold-blooded perpetration of his vilest actions by the delirium of himself. Revolting and inherently incredible as this hypothesis is, however, the fact remains that until Mr. Massey undertook the analysis performed in so exhaustive and masterly a way in these pages no intelligible solution of the mystery of the "Sonnets" had been achieved by any one; and for that reason, and in despair of elucidation on more satisfactory lines, many Shakespeareans no doubt provisionally accepted the libellous theory referred to.

Mr. Massey brings a new one which possesses so many recommendations that it can hardly fail to establish itself in the minds of such as are not hopelessly prepossessed. He begins by attacking the received order of arrangement of the "Sonnets," and shows, by internal as well as external evidence, that their chronological sequence as published hitherto is all wrong. By rearranging them in groups, he brings out the first faint indications of a new interpretation. Then he opens his argument in support of the main contention of his thesis: namely, that while some of the "Sonnets" are personal, others are dramatic—that is to say, that Shakespeare wrote these latter in personification of others, and that the sentiments expressed are not his own, but those of the persons he is dramatically representing. Without quoting the different classes of "Sonnets," it is of course impossible to convey the weight and significance of this line of argument, but it may be said that he said that Mr. Massey proceeds in his careful, patient and minute analysis, the reader finds new light breaking in upon him at every step, and the evidence becomes cumulative and cogent to the point of irresistible conviction. The theory is, boldly outlined, that some of the "Sonnets" were addressed by Shakespeare to Southampton, and of these (mostly the earlier ones) many are intended to persuade the young Earl to marriage; that the dramatic "Sonnets" relate to the loves of Southampton and Elizabeth Vernon, and to the latter's jealousy and fears of Lady Penelope Rich; that other dramatic "Sonnets" were written for or in relation to William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke; that all the "Sonnets" which are characterized by passion are dramatic; and that all the personal "Sonnets" express those lofty, pure and dignified thoughts which we should expect from Shakespeare, and which correspond fully with his character as known to us through his plays.

The acuteness and skill with which Mr. Massey works out, reinforces, and gives tangibility to his hypothesis, are remarkable. It may indeed be objected that he has extended his analysis so far as to interfere with the effect of his conclusions. On the other hand he has written a text-book and an invaluable work of reference, none of which can be doubted, that henceforth whoever proposes an explanation of the "Sonnets" which conflicts with this will be under paramount obligations to encounter and overthrow Mr. Massey's strong positions, as an indispensable preliminary to the introduction of a new theory. Certainly, the author has built solidly and well, and even such as question the finality of his judgments must admire the honest enthusiasm for Shakespeare's fair fame, the manly indignation against the great poet's speculative detractors, the lambent humor, the keen wit, the flashes of poetic diction, the brilliant imagery, the vigorous and close reason-

ing, the apt illustration, and the sound Shakespearean scholarship which characterize this labor of love. It must be said also that the positions of Mr. Massey are thoroughly sane and reasonable, that he strains no point to strengthen his case, but that known fact and plausible suggestion fit together with the most striking and harmonious results.

Besides the Secret Drama of the "Sonnets," the volume contains four interesting and weighty essays: on "Shakespeare's Southampton," "Sidney's Stella," "Shakespeare and Bacon," and "The Man Shakespeare and his Private Friends." In the third of these papers, which is a slashing critique of the Baconians and Mr. Donnelly, the tables are turned amusingly upon the latter by a demonstration of Bacon's borrowings from Shakespeare for the proof of which the "Prometheus," aided by a little chronology, serves admirably. Mr. Massey's handsome volume, being now issued in a popular edition, will doubtless find its way to the shelves of all Shakespeare students, none of whom can afford to dispense with so powerful and interesting an argument for what is certainly the most consistent, homogeneous, and altogether credible solution of the "Sonnets" extant.

NEW NOVELS.

A STUPID BOOK BY ZOLA.

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unhappily that they cannot, no, they cannot understand it. They cannot calculate Mr. Goschen's interest on their own fortune.

Half the men in the world, who are not sensitive to music, think it an impossibility for them to learn to read musical notation, and we have heard a man, not without power of reasoning, and with a special aptitude for mental arithmetic, declare that a thousand years of tuition would not enable him to comprehend a quadrature equation. Indeed, it is one of the phenomena of mental laziness that it often reveals itself in a scented form in the naturally able.

LITERARY NOTES.

There is a rumor that the Rev. Edward Everett Hale has in preparation a "Life of Christ."

Mrs. Hagne, of Alabama, has written a graphic account of the experiences of the blockaded people of her State during the Civil War; and Houghton & Mifflin will soon publish the book under the title of "A Blockaded Family."

Mr. Stockton's last book, "Amos Kilbright," has already gone into its second edition.

The verses of Victor Hugo, collectively called "The Ocean," are, it is to be supposed, not specially interesting scraps, as they were written during the course of his long life at occasional moments not only in notebooks, but on odd bits of paper, old envelopes, prospectus backs, etc., all of which he carefully preserved. This miscellaneous heap of odes and strophes, of epic and chanson, and verse, sometimes of two rhyming words only, as "Eloa," and "Boa," will make a very strange volume.

Mr. Edward House's pathetic Japanese novel, "Yone Sato," is coming in book form from the press of Hurd, Clark & Co. It is said that this story, written serially in "The Atlantic," created so much unpleasant comment among the friends of missionary enterprise that Eastern publishers did not care to bring out the book. The Western men are more adventurous. Everybody who did not read "Yone" in "The Atlantic" will be curious to see what has caused so much excitement.

A closely thing, which was also jolly, once happened to Mrs. Fremont, and she has written about it for the Christmas "Wide-Awake."

George Moore, the author of several rather unpleasant novels, wants a new system of criticism, and would like all literature to come under the judgment of specialists. By the opinion of any three distinguished living men of letters he would be content to abide. An irreverent fellow-countryman suggests that Mr. Moore has forgotten his literary history. What of Wordsworth condemning the immorality of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn"? What of Ruskin, who called "The Mill on the Floss" immoral before he had read it? What of R. L. Stevenson, who called "The Idylls of the King" "a dirty, vulgar, and coarse"? "Your man of genius," says Mr. Moore's friend, "is a very uncertain creature."

Mr. Arlo Bates's new novel, "The Philistines," is coming from the press of Ticknor & Co. It deals among other things with legislative lobbying.

The distinguished Oriental scholar and Biblical specialist, Dr. Robert Young, has just died in his sixtieth year. His "Analytical Concordance of the Bible" is known all over the world.

Mr. Charles H. Webb (John Paul) is about to publish through Ticknor & Co. a volume of poems. He has entitled it "Vagrom Verse."

Brother, D. H. Rossetti's forthcoming volume on his brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, is neither biography nor criticism. It merely presents a number of details about the poet and his work, set forth in narrative form. "The Athenaeum" says that the plan of the book is as follows: 1. The account of the works of art, arranged under the headings of the successive years; 2. The account of the literary works, similarly arranged; 3. A prose paraphrase of the series of sonnets named "The House of Life," aiming to clear up the difficulties (which some readers seem to consider formidable) in the diction and structure of these poems—a performance of mere paraphrase exposition, not of biographical or critical comment; 4. Some additional remarks on the poet's work in literature, including several of the world in general, and the scheme of the work, based as it is on correspondence may not have been dealt with in the text.

TWO STORIES OF DUMAS.

From The London Globe.

In the preface to a new book on sport by the Baron de Vaux, Alexander Dumas is told some interesting stories of his father and grandfather, of which we reproduce the following: "My grandfather, who was a remarkable strength of which I had the first experience when I was fourteen or fifteen years of age, once told me a story which he had heard from his father, the end of the play it related in torrents. He moved toward a large alcove on the boulevard and signaled me to follow him. He gave me an address, and when we stood upright beside his vehicle, into which we prepared to mount. The coachman put his hand on the door, saying: 'I don't move a foot for less than five francs for the journey.' 'Will you not move?' 'Once, twice, three.' Cabbie did not respond, but remained with his hand on the door. Then my grandfather, who was a remarkable strength of which I had the first experience when I was fourteen or fifteen years of age, once told me a story which he had heard from his father, the end of the play it related in torrents.